

The Service of
The Hudson Bay Company
to Canada

by

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The two most important events in the history of the seventeenth century concerning Canada are the founding of Quebec by Champlain in 1608 and the discovery of Hudson's Bay by Henry Hudson in 1610. These two events are the foundation stones upon which the Dominion of Canada was erected.

Very different, however, was the course taken in the two cases after the first steps were planted. Champlain could commence his forward movement at once. The territory on which Champlain saw a New France rising, lay open to the incomer. The fertile fields, which held his mind's eye, lay on either side of a great river, reaching backward from the ocean with scarcely an impediment to vessels until the rapids above the Island of Montreal were reached. Here was space enough for such a number of settlers, as would make easy the transplanting of a body of his countrymen. These men, bringing with them their religion, laws and customs,

would fix firmly what he had begun, and widen the boundaries of France to include a new country beyond the seas. Nor would the possibilities be exhausted if every mile of river front from far below Quebec to the Lachine Rapids were furnishing the footing for a long line of homesteads, on which dwelt a happy contented people. Farther to the west stretched great spaces, covered with a soil even more fertile than that occupied, everywhere intersected by rivers holding out their invitations to the adventurous.

The consequence of these favoring circumstances was that by the end of the century, a colony was firmly planted, extending upward from Cap Tourmente to Montreal. Exploration had also made known the great tract lying between Lake Ontario and Lake Nipissing on the north, and bounded on the west by Lake Huron, and outposts had been placed at Detroit and Sault Ste Marie.

The prospect which greeted the eyes of the adventurers into Hudson Bay was in all respects the reverse of that which excited the imagination of Champlain. Away to the west were vast plains, the latent capabilities of which were quite equal to those which were being developed on the shores of the St. Lawrence, but they were able to convey no hint of their existence to the explorer in the Bay. Between them and him

was drawn a strong barrier, made up of nearly all the elements by which nature guards her treasures.

Although the Bay was entered, in 1610, it was not until sixty years had elapsed that men could be found, who were willing to risk means and lives in a sustained effort to turn to account the resources of the vast regions of which the Bay was the centre. After an exploratory visit in a vessel under the command of an Englishman and a Frenchman—typical of the bi-racial character of Canada—a group of gentlemen, headed by Prince Rupert, cousin of the reigning monarch, sought and obtained the proprietorship. Their charter gave them exclusive right of trade, in all the territories lying within the entrance of Hudson Straits, which were not actually possessed by other British subjects or by the subjects of any other Christian state. What did this mean? The question has been asked many times during the two centuries following the grant. The answers proposed have been as various as the interests the particular answer was intended to serve.

To the plain man, the intention of Charles II seems fairly clear. He had before him one or two facts and a popular belief. The facts were that, leaving the Atlantic Ocean, a vessel passed through a long strait at the end of which was a great bay, the shores of which to some extent had been visited by English ves-

sels. The popular belief was that by one or other of the waterways discharging into the bay on its western or northern side, a passage existed which led to the South Sea, on the further side of which lay Japan and China. What the length of that passage might be, was mere conjecture and the time required to traverse it might be measured by days, or weeks or months.

The King then in his charter said in effect: The Company, having at their own cost and charges undertaken an expedition to Hudson Bay for the discovery of a passage into the South Sea and for finding trade in furs, minerals and other commodities which may prove of very great advantage to the Kingdom, require for the pursuance of their design, the exclusive right of trade in those regions. We, therefore, by this charter, incorporate the Company under the title of "The Governor and Company of Adventurers trading into Hudson's Bay." We grant the Company the sole trade in, and the possession of, all the territories, from the mouth of the Hudson's Straits inward. What extent of territory however, this comprehends we know not, but henceforward it all belongs to the Company. There was one limitation. The King could not grant what was not his. He therefore excluded from the grant, any territory in the possession of any other British subject or of any other Christian King.

There is not a word in the charter limiting the Company's possessions to the territories through which pass the waterways emptying into Hudson Bay and Straits. Everything from the entrance of Hudson Straits to the South Sea was conveyed to the Company by the grant. The limits to the west were left to the Company to discover. No suspicion existed of the thousands of miles that lay beyond the western shores of the bay, or of the Rocky Mountains which divided the continent in two.

The right of King Charles to grant, and of the Company to hold, the territories designated in the charter was disputed by France. All the territory comprised in the grant was claimed as part of Canada under titles even less definite in terms than the charter. The claim was followed by overland raids from Canada upon the Company's forts, which with the counter-raids occupied more than quarter of a century. The treaty of Utrecht (1713) restored peace between England and France, and assured the Hudson's Bay Company in the possession of the Bay and environing territories.

No definite boundaries were fixed by the Treaty, these being left to be determined by commissioners appointed by the governments of the two countries. Several years elapsed before the commissioners were appointed, and their task set before them.

The Company kept an anxious eye on the proceedings. Their interests had been sacrificed by the Government in the treaty of Ryswick in 1697, and they were determined to leave nothing undone to impress on the Government the nature and extent of the rights, which they held to be their due. Their chief concern was to guard the entrance to the straits from intrusion. Consequently, they asked that, in drawing the boundary line between their territories and Canada, it should begin at Grimington Island on the Atlantic Ocean south westward, through Lake Mistassini, and on, still, pursuing the same direction, till it reached the 49° parallel of latitude, and thence due west along this line. The French contested the Company's claim at every point, and, in the result, no agreement was reached before the treaty of Paris, which in 1763 ceded the whole of the French possessions on the continent to England.

The right of the Hudson's Bay Company to the exclusive possession of the inland territories to the west and south of the Bay was ignored by the French. They, too had been infected by the vision of a great sea, accessible by waterways through these territories, by which the merchandize of France could be transported to China. By way of inducement to explorers to turn their energies and experience in this direction, the Government offered a monopoly of the fur trade through the countries traversed to persons undertaking

the search for this distant sea. Expeditions were organized, and explorations carried forward, notably by the famous La Vérendrye and his heroic sons. The result was that, at the end of the French régime, posts were set up and relations established with the Indians from the Assiniboine to the upper waters of the Saskatchewan, and as far west as the line between the present Calgary and Edmonton.

During all this period, the Hudson's Bay Company continued to pursue the plans with which they had begun. They had their posts at the mouths of the several rivers down which the Indians came to the Bay, and the exchange of furs for fire-arms, blankets and the trinkets which were attractive to native eyes took place at the entrance of the posts. Two exploratory expeditions were sent out, the first under Henry Kelsey in 1691-2, the second by Samuel Hearne between 1769 and 1772. The country covered by Kelsey has not been satisfactorily identified. His instructions required him to make known to the Indians he would encounter the advantages of trading with the Company, and to endeavor to dissuade them from the constant intertribal wars, by which they were gradually destroying one another. His journal shows him to have been so intent on carrying out these instructions, that he neglected to give a clear account of where he had been. Hearne's expeditions were more important. Setting out from the

mouth of the Churchill river, his travels carried him to the Coppermine river, which he descended to its mouth on the Arctic ocean. All this great country extending as far to the west as Slave lake was added definitely to the Company's territories.

The passing of French rule in Canada was an event of grave significance to the Hudson's Bay Company. The days were gone when expeditions from Montreal, were carried on under the grudging, when not interested, patronage of the governor. Exploration with a single eye to the trade to be got from the western territories was thereafter in private hands, and the men who pursued it were of the most vigorous races on earth, Scotchmen and New Englanders. The formation of the North West Company in 1784, and the energy with which they prosecuted their schemes for capturing the trade in all parts of the western territories aroused the Company to a like activity, and a strife ensued between the rival companies, one operating from Hudson Bay, the other from Montreal, which lasted for a full generation. It was only brought to an end by the amalgamation of the two companies into one great Hudson's Bay Company in 1821.

Under the direction of an energetic and large-visioned Scotchman, George Simpson, the activities of the Company covered the whole of the northern por-

tion of the North American continent. Before the amalgamation, all the more important strategic points on the rivers which emptied their waters into either Hudson Bay or the Arctic ocean were occupied by the posts of one or other of the companies. British Columbia had been penetrated from the plains of the west by Mackenzie, Fraser, Thomson and other intrepid Norwesters, and lucrative trading centres had been established on Stuart Lake, and on the Fraser and Columbia rivers. When the newly re-organized company entered into possession, its trading system covered the whole extent of continent from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

To the south no boundaries had been fixed between the Company's territories and the United States beyond the Rocky Mountains and the operations of its traders extended to include the country now comprehended in the States of Oregon and Washington. The boundary from the Lake of the Woods to the Rocky Mountains had been established by treaty in 1818. It follows the 49th parallel, the line put forward by Great Britain in presenting the case for the Hudson's Bay Company under the treaty of Utrecht.

The fixing of the line beyond the Rocky Mountains was a matter of great difficulty, and the negotiations were at times overclouded by the prospect of war.

The Company had posts down the Columbia river, and on this account as well as on the ground of priority of discovery, claimed this river as the boundary. The United States resisted the claim, and put forward facts tending to disprove the British assertion of prior discovery. The Americans offered as a boundary the extension of the 49th parallel to the Pacific, but agreed to a joint occupancy until a settlement was reached. They were persuaded, and justly, that time was with them and that in a short time the influx of their own people from the East would leave but one settlement possible. So steady was the movement of American farmers into the disputed district, that, in 1846, there were at least 7,000 American settlers in the district and only 400 British. The British acknowledged the logic of events and agreed to the proposal of the 49th parallel as the boundary line to the ocean.

The Company, in this surrender, had a valuable lesson, and, fortunately, at not too great a cost. Thereafter a clear policy was indicated. Foreigners could no longer be admitted to settle in their territories. It was a policy difficult to maintain. The spirit of the time was against it. They incurred unpopularity not only with foreigners, but also with people in the British Empire. The Hudson's Bay Company and the odious word monopoly became synonymous terms. But they held on,

braving the unpopularity, till the time was ripe and the territories could be handed over to the safekeeping of the newly created Dominion of Canada.

The act by which the North West Territories were made part of Canada increased the territorial extent of the country threefold. The four original provinces had an area of rather more than 1,100,000 square miles. When the territory now comprised in the three western provinces and what are still known as the North West Territories were added, the area of the Dominion became over 3,300,000 square miles.

Nor was this all. Within those territories was the nucleus of a state. Up and down Red River, and on the banks of the Assiniboine were a group of settlements, converging about Fort Garry. There was a simple form of government, fully suited to the needs of the settlements and as adaptable to an expanding population as the earlier governments of Upper and Lower Canada had shown themselves to be. Justice was administered according to the laws of England, and was as swift and sure as is British justice throughout the world. Over this immense territory the Company maintained efficient jurisdiction for nearly two hundred years whilst from the East civilization was slowly spreading westward. For Great Britain and for Canada a prudent policy preserved the furs; and natural resources were conserved.

Alien occupancy was thwarted, the native peoples conciliated, and a national asset of incalculable value was assured to future generations.

Canada and the British Empire owe the Hudson's Bay Company a debt of gratitude, which it is difficult to overestimate.

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